2: Stefansson--112 (1908-1912) 1914 Copper Eskimo
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"We found, accordingly, in Coronation Gulf that a good snow shovel made of one piece of wood was worth as much as a dog or as any but the very best sleds."

28: Jenness E-5 (1914-1916) 1946
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CHAPTER I

MATERIAL RESOURCES

Few people have been called upon to sustain life and perpetuate their race on such meagre resources as the Copper Eskimo. Even if they had been acquainted with agriculture the climate debarred it, just as it debarred the growth of trees except in two or three sheltered valleys along the southern fringe of their territory. It restricted not only the flora but the fauna, leaving the natives dependent for their food and for much of their equipment on one land animal, the seasonally migrating caribou, and two sea mammals, the foetid and the bearded seals, supplemented by such fish as they could capture in rivers, lakes, and bays. Ignorant of all metals except their native copper, which seemed to them only a malleable stone, and cut off from contact with any but neighbouring tribes, little or no more advanced than themselves, they had to build up their lives on the scanty resources provided by their own narrow environment, and rely on their own ingenuity to supply all their needs.

The resources provided by their environment fall naturally into four groups:

Wood
Stone (including native copper and other minerals)
Bone, antler, horn, ivory
Hides and sinew.

WOOD

The Copper Eskimo obtained their wood from two sources. First, there was the driftwood, mainly spruce and cottonwood, carried to the ocean by Mackenzie River far to the westward and borne by the winds and currents to Dolphin and Union Strait and western bays of Victoria Island. Then in the valleys of three rivers that flowed into Coronation Gulf, Coppermine, Napaktauktauk, and Tree, there stood scattered groves of spruce, small and stunted, a few miles from the coast, but larger as one proceeded south. Far to the southeast, too, near Thelon River, were other stands of spruce that the Eskimo from Bathurst Inlet and from the eastern shores of Victoria Island occasionally visited in their wanderings. Thus the Copper Eskimo had abundant wood to satisfy all their needs; but as driftwood was very scarce in many districts, and the standing timber on the southern fringe of their territory could be reached only after a long journey overland, which many natives were disinclined to make, manufactured objects of wood were among the commonest articles of trade and passed freely from one end of the territory to the other. Moreover, so crude were the Eskimo tools, and so great the labour of cutting down the trees and hewing the timber into shape, that any object of moderate size, such as a sled-runner, a table, or even a tent-pole, commanded a high price.[1]

The principal tools used in working wood were the adze and the whittling knife (*See* pp. 100 and 103). Bone or antler wedges, generally made for each occasion and immediately discarded, served to split small logs and planks; they were driven home with boulders. Lacking saws, the Eskimo shortened a plank in one or other of three ways: they hacked it with the adze; gouged it across with the grooving tool (*See* p. 100); or they drilled a line of holes across it with the bow drill.

[1] Cf. Stefansson, V.: The Stefansson-Anderson Arctic Expedition: Anth. Papers, Amer. Mus. of Nat. Hist., vol. XIV, pt. I, pp. 11, 43 ff et al., New York, 1914.

Lamps only 2 or 3 inches long were children's toys, often made by themselves while their parents were manufacturing larger vessels. The Copper Eskimo placed on the graves of females these minature lamps, or else genuine vessels of small size, simply because they valued their larger lamps too highly to throw them away, and believed that the dead person could enlarge a miniature to suit its needs. Frequently, perhaps generally, they recovered useful lamps that had been deposited on the graves of relatives a few years earlier. Very rarely did they make a lamp, even a miniature one, for mortuary purposes only; and when they did, it was nearly always a wooden model, because soapstone was procurable only in one or two districts.

Figure 49. Bag for grass or eriophorum seeds, made from loon's foot. IV.D.324. 1/1.

Most of the cooking was done on lamps not less than 24 inches long. Lamps smaller than this, even down to 5 and 6 inches, served for short journeys, but were not intended primarily for that purpose any more than to be deposited on graves. Rather they were used to dry extra clothes, to give additional light for sewing or working, or to enable a little girl to play at housekeeping in a corner of the hut. Two small lamps laid side by side sometimes took the place of one large lamp for cooking. When these smaller specimens were made of soapstone the shapes were the same, and the workmanship as careful, as in the larger ones. Frequently, however, a family was content to use a water-worn pebble with a saucer-shaped depression, or a naturally hollow slab of limestone or dolomite.

If we exclude the makeshift lamps last mentioned there was really only one kind among the Copper Eskimo, the regular house lamp, of which the smaller specimens, when not mere toys, were generally used for light alone, the larger for both light and heat. Nearly all were made of talc chlorite schist, a soapstone that is soft, of even texture, easily worked with stone or copper tools, and not liable to crack and break under the low heat of the burning blubber.[1]

[1] In their spring treks the Eskimo sometimes rested the lamp directly on two snow blocks and kept them lighted for a considerable time without other effect than the gradual melting of the snow.

354 437 439 No other Eskimo group seems to have used lamps of this type unless derived by them in trade from the Copper Eskimo, for their convenient shape and large size caused them to command an extensive market. Not only were they bartered from group to group throughout the Coronation Gulf area, but they were traded along the coast to the Netchilik Eskimo of King William Island, and westward beyond the natives of Mackensie delta to Barrow.[1]

• 435 354 322 237 356 Their value naturally increased according to their distance from the source of supply. Thus, on the west coast of Victoria Island, when the small 12-inch lamp (Figure 55) fell and shattered its back rim, its owner, or more probably her husband, did not discard it, as she would probably have done in Coronation Gulf, but made an entirely new back piece of wood, which she lashed through three holes with cords of sealskin or plaited sinew.[2] The larger lamps, of course, were mended everywhere, sometimes with another piece of soapstone, more usually with wood, which was cemented with seal blood and secured with lashings.

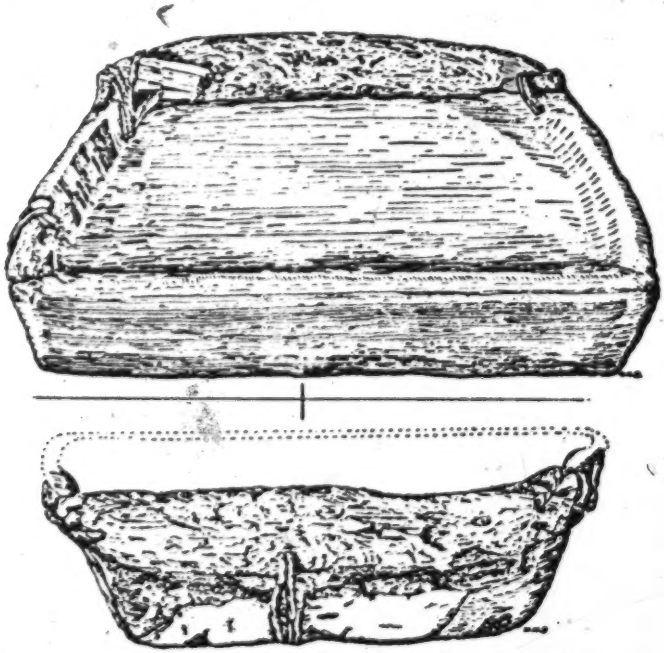

Figure 55. Lamp repaired with wood. IV.D.1860. Approx. 1/3.

354 The National Museum of Canada possesses two very shallow ellipsoidal lamps, obtained in Prince Albert Sound, that have no partitions, are rounded on the bottoms, inside and outside, and must be tilted forward to permit the oil to flow to the wick. One (Figure 56), 15¼ inches long by 8½ inches wide, has been

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[1] Cf. Simpson, John: The Western Eskimo; Arctic Papers for the Expedition of 1875, London, 1875, p. 257.
[2] The specimen is too heavily encrusted with blubber to determine the exact material of the lashings.

lines, harpoon lines, and lashings of various kinds. No doubt the Copper Eskimo in emergencies made use of sinew from other sources, for the Mackenzie Delta natives sometimes use the sinew on the tail of the fox, which is about a foot long and said to be of excellent quality. 283

After the flesh had been carefully scraped away the sinew was allowed to dry a little; but as prolonged exposure to the heat of the sun rendered it stiff and brittle, it was generally stored away at once in a bag. The value of a slab of back sinew was fairly high everywhere along the Arctic coast.[1] Caribou were very abundant in the Copper Eskimo country until about 1919, but in the absence of linen or cotton thread—which in any case is less suitable for skin garments—sinew was in such great demand that it was constantly traded from one family or group to another. [435] [136] [437]

For ordinary sewing a thin strand was stripped off the slab with the teeth or thumb nail, drawn through the teeth to remove all roughness, and rolled against the cheek to twist it into a single smooth thread. Waterboots, however, called for a stouter three-ply thread, made by the women and girls in the house, where they fastened the ends of the threads to the drying rack, and caught the middle strand between the second and third fingers while they crossed the two outer ones with the thumbs and index fingers. Fishing lines of leg sinew were plaited similarly of three strands, but the harpoon lines, which required to be flat, had from four to eight strands, sometimes even more. Twisting, as with rope, was an unknown art.

Sewing Bags and Baskets. A Copper Eskimo woman without her needle and thread would have been as uncomfortable as a European housewife without her knitting. Sewing was no impediment to gossip: the woman sat on the sleeping skins, her legs doubled under her or stretched out in front, and plied her needle and her tongue at the same rate. Always she sewed from right to left; only a left-handed person sewed in the opposite direction. She held the thimble on the first finger (not on the middle, as we do), and pushed the needle through the skin with the side of the thimble, not with its top, if indeed it had a top. Then she caught the point between the thumb and middle finger, drew the needle out, turned it on its side, and with her thimble behind it pulled through the thread and reinserted the needle for the next stitch. Usually she did not tauten the thread until the second stitch. 294 462 [516] [521]

There was more sewing to be done at certain seasons than at others. Thus, in the autumn, all the new clothing for the winter had to be finished before the sun disappeared below the horizon for the long winter night. The women then sewed from early morning until late at night, with only brief respites to cook the meals or to pass the time of day with neighbours. A woman who had no children to sew for was, of course, less busy; the mother of a family was obliged not only to make the clothes for the whole household, but to train her girls to be dressmakers also. The latter began their training with odd scraps of skin, which they learned to join with neat close stitches. Later, they mended rents in their own clothing, and made dolls fully clothed from head to foot. Many men could make their own trousers and socks, and even sealskin shoes in an emergency; but only a very few could cut out a well-fitting coat or make a pair of waterboots that would really keep out the water. Even the women never attained great skill in these last-mentioned tasks until long after marriage, and a young wife often sought the assistance of an older relative or friend. [221] 294 462 828

The work-basket of most women was a bag of caribou or some other skin, or else, more rarely, a neatly worked basket of coiled willow twigs held in place with willow-bark stitching (Figures 91, 92). All the baskets that I saw were 415 [285]

[1] In 1914 the price of one slab of caribou back sinew at Barrow, Alaska, was $1.

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left them no time to hunt seals; and they had to buy clothing too from the same stores when the rifles that the traders supplied them exterminated the herds of caribou or drove them into districts far remote. So the new barter economy—furs in exchange for the goods of civilization—made life harder instead of easier, more complicated instead of more simple. The commercial world of the white man had caught the Eskimos in its mesh, destroyed their self-sufficiency and independence, and made them economically its slaves. Only in one respect did it benefit them: it lessened the danger of those unpredictable famines which had overtaken them every ten or fifteen years, bringing suffering and death to young and old without distinction.

Today the youth of the second generation faces another revolution. The atomic age is reaching out towards the Arctic. On this coast and on that stand radar outposts to scan the upper atmosphere, scientific stations to study it and to measure the sun's rays. Already a handful of Jennie's cousins and nephews have found employment at some of these stations: they have unloaded ships and planes, driven motor-boats and caterpillar-tractors, and shown a competence equal to the white man's in operating civilization's simpler machines. Only opportunity and training are lacking to equip them for larger roles. They are adapting themselves, too, to our money economy, and learning to work for a daily wage. But when we who created this money economy igno-

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rantly distort and misapply it, how can we teach Eskimos but one step removed from the stone age to use it for their own and others' welfare, and not for increasing human unhappiness? 177 [435]

DIAMOND JENNESS

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